



Social Media and the Army

Chondra Perry

REMEMBER WHEN BEING SOCIAL meant sharing your favorite beverage with a friend at the local hangout or neighbors leaning over their backyard fence talking about everything from politics to the local football team? Those days are in the past. Communication has grown globally over the years; today's technology opens a completely new way of sharing ideas, thoughts, and the latest *on dit*. Our Army has embraced the world of social media as the power of communication has taken a new turn. Typewriters, landlines, and beepers are communication tools of the past. A new generation of immediacy has created a firestorm of social media tools that encourage interaction and create dialogue at the click of a mouse.

Social media has had an undeniable effect on the way we live, work, and communicate throughout the world. Military leaders are recognizing the importance of social media and taking steps to incorporate change into their organizational cultures. This is partly due to the sheer number of users in the military community who are using social networking as a conduit to stay connected and tell their story. Facebook, a social networking website, has more than 250 million users with more than 120 million of them logging on at least once a day.¹ Every minute, YouTube users upload 10 minutes of video and watch hundreds of millions of videos.² Social media has introduced a whole new language, where complete words now become one letter and smiley faces and emoticons show emotion and feeling. This ever-evolving technology flourishes in a culture where time is precious and social interaction is unpredictable.

Social media computer concepts are not new and have in fact been around for over 20 years. The first online chat system surfaced in 1980 with CompuServe's CB simulator.³ The simulator connected corporate America and cyberspace. In 1986, these services expanded to include Europe, and networking became a global application. The World Wide Web, not to be confused with the Internet, went public in 1991, and gave birth to the dot.com boom that enabled companies and organizations to reach a wider target audience. Today these same concepts have given organizations and individuals social networking websites such as MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and other social networking avenues for information sharing.

Editor's Note: Ms. Perry points out that the Department of Defense has recently relaxed its controls on certain social networking sites such as YouTube and MySpace, though commanders can still restrict access due to security concerns or bandwidth limitations.

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PHOTO: Soldiers use the computers at Forward Operating Base Yusufiyah, Iraq, 16 August 2009, to surf the internet. (U.S. Navy, Mass Communication Specialist 2d Class Edwin L. Wriston)

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The sheer number of Web 2.0 applications available makes it easier to communicate with family and friends from a distance. Perceptive military leaders are opening up their organizations to Soldiers, civilians, and family members with the use of social networking tools like Twitter and blogging. Town Hall meetings have taken on a new dimension, allowing more individuals to contribute to the forums in real time.

Senior Strategist for Emerging Media with the Department of Defense Jack Holt defines social media as an “environment outside of hierarchy, the democratization of publishing allowing everybody to have a voice . . . It’s outside the hierarchy and everybody has the opportunity to engage.”⁴ This understanding of social media, and a level of transparency that encourages a dialogue, has aided Department of Defense social media efforts.

Social Media in the Army

Social media is about having a conversation, interacting with your friends or followers, and developing relationships. On any given day internet users can Google the word *Army* and get over 228,000,000 website hits. The information is mind-boggling and not always official in nature. The Army’s initial efforts to establish a Facebook presence showed numerous web pages with no Army affiliation. Leaders worried who was telling the story and whether there was a valid government presence. Under the guidance of Major General Kevin J. Bergner, then Chief of Public Affairs, the Army stood up its new Online and Social Media Division at the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs in January 2009. The Army decided it was time to open up the lines of communication and further the conversation. Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Arata, the director of Online and Social Media Division, says the Army’s presence in social media came about primarily because the Internet was the avenue where individuals were obtaining information about the Army. It is important that the Army reach across all generations and demographics, including Soldiers, when communicating with the public, so social media is a good avenue because they are not generational or demographically stigmatized.

The content the Army uses on its different social networking sites is almost always linked back to traditional Army websites, lending validity to the news. The goal is a conversation and dialogue-centric

Leaders at the highest levels are embracing social media.

interchanges. Lindy Kyzer, a public affairs specialist with the Online and Social Media Division, says that the division has been able to use these sites to seamlessly incorporate the Army’s web image and facilitate dialogue that is attractive to visitors because users provide their own experiences and feedback⁵.

Leaders at the highest levels are embracing social media and incorporating it into their basic operations. Currently there are no Department of the Army policies regarding social media; however, leaders must consider the following basic social media considerations:

- **Presence.** If you are not there to communicate your message, someone else will do it for you.
- **Relevance.** A presence in social media is necessary but not sufficient. The medium requires content that adds value. Explore the platform and develop a communications strategy.
- **Prominence.** As you develop your social media presence, consider how prominent you want to be and tailor your profile and participation accordingly.⁶

Soldiers, civilians, and family members should remember two basic principles: operations security and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The Army developed a set of best practices, which include basic rules of engagement, awareness, and regulations. Users should keep the Army’s image and good order and discipline in mind when engaging in social media.

Participating in social networking is an individual’s personal decision. Soldiers have the right to express themselves in a public forum; however, if they participate in a social networking site where they might be identified or associated with the U.S. Army, they must be very cognizant of how they represent their organization and the United States of America.⁷ The possibilities are endless for online collaboration using web based applications.

Types of Social Media

The U.S. Army has an active presence on several social networking sites, including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Flickr.

Facebook. Facebook is a social networking site that allows individuals to connect and share information with friends and family through profiles. In June 2009, Army Operations Order (OPORD) 09-01 directed bases to stop blocking Facebook and other social media from troops. Although the OPORD has limitations based on operational domain authority and application, the intent is clear: social media has enlisted in the Army. The Army utilizes the site as an information-sharing mechanism providing the latest military news. Facebook is also an effective platform for leaders to reach a wider target audience and address quality of life concerns and developments. Facebook's basic principles are in keeping with the Army's attitude of transparency and commitment to its greatest asset: people.⁸

YouTube. YouTube is a forum that allows individuals to upload and share videos. Users can express themselves and share comments about other users' creativity. Businesses also use YouTube as a teaching and training mechanism for employees and the public. The Army utilizes YouTube to communicate Army efforts worldwide to a diverse community. Senior leaders become visible in videos, inviting Soldiers to provide their feedback. The resulting dialogue and comments stimulate interest in the Army's story. YouTube Army followers can watch videos of firefights on the streets of Iraq or U.S. troops assisting in humanitarian efforts. These videos tell the Army's story through actual events played out on screen.

Combat camerapersons gather the footage broadcast on the Multi-National Force-Iraq YouTube site, sharing the sacrifices and commitment of our Soldiers with the world. This footage educates the user about a day in the life of a Soldier and is unlike footage from previous military actions that rarely reached the public. Subscribers obtain first-hand, real coverage that is truthful and insightful and catalogs the history of our military forces.

Recruiting takes on a new form with YouTube. Recruiters can reach a larger market with recruiting bites channeled through YouTube videos. According to the Army's Accessions Command, "the videos

YouTube Army followers can watch videos of firefights on the streets of Iraq...

posted to YouTube "are not propaganda." They are instead an effort by the military to "participate in the YouTube community" and counter some of the "misrepresentations" of the Army and Army life found on the Web."⁹ Leaders are telling the Army story while at the same time countering the critical perceptions that the public may have based on inaccurate data.

Twitter. Twitter is a micro-blogging website that allows users to send messages (140 characters or less) to a large number of users at one time, often answering the question "What are you doing?" Twitter allows you to be in control of how much information you release and who gets your information. It is an excellent source for commanders because it permits them to provide updates to their followers on the go. Users can link Twitter to their cell phones and send and receive messages from anywhere. The Army is using Twitter to reach their 15,000-plus followers by providing them links to stories and content placed on Army.mil.

Flickr. Flickr is an online scrapbook that allows you to post photos or videos for others to view. It gives you a place to store your photos, and it provides the general public with a window into your organization. They can not only view your photos but also make comments, add notes, or tag them.

Flickr allows the Army or any Department of Defense (DOD) organization to tell its story with pictures. Comments made on the photos provide DOD officials with insight into the minds of the general public and those viewing the albums. The use of Flickr has some basic rules of engagement:

- Don't upload anything that isn't yours.
- Don't forget the children.
- Don't upload content that is illegal or prohibited.
- Don't vent your frustrations, rant, or bore other members.
- Don't use your account to host web logos and banners for commercial purposes.¹⁰

The list is not all-inclusive and subscribers should know and understand the rules prior to using this valuable resource. The Online and Social Media Division at the U.S. Army Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, which manages the Army's Flickr site, advises its subscribers that—

- No profanity will be tolerated. Profanity in comments will result in immediate deletion.
- No personal attacks or derogatory remarks will be tolerated.

- Any type of repeated spam messages may be deleted at the discretion of the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs.¹¹

Seems like a lot of do's and don'ts—but not really. After all, this is a community forum committed to informing the American people and our Soldiers about the Army in an environment that fosters excellence.

Social Media Strategies

When organizations and individuals understand the principles and benefits of social media applications, a bevy of opportunities present themselves when accurately strategized. Planning might include—

Your Strategy. Think about each platform before you decide to establish a profile and ensure it meets the needs of your organization. Just because the sites are out there doesn't mean your organization needs to be on all of them.

Manpower. Will you have the resources to manage and maintain the sites? If you can't commit to updating your social media sites at least once per week, or provide enough new content to keep users coming back, the platform is probably not a good idea for your organization.

Messaging. Social media is all about taking your identity or messaging and turning over control to your community. A Facebook wall and a Flickr comments stream are places for both positive and negative comments. If you're not willing to lose control of the message and give some of the power to your community, using social media is not for you.¹² But you should ask, "Can I afford not to become involved in this mainstream method of sharing my message?" Once an organization becomes committed to the effort, leaders should continue evaluating their programs and adjust fire when needed.

Not every site is for all organizations. Leaders must carefully analyze their organization to garner the biggest bang for their efforts. Leaders of over 80 military organizations are engaging their communities in dialogue. The Army.mil website provides critical resources on its "create for effect" page that offer users the means to duplicate the "look and feel" of the Army's home-page. The site provides designer, developer, and content editor assistance to help create the correct Army representation for an organization.

This branding toolkit takes the guesswork out of presenting a well developed website, which is half the battle. A poorly planned website can quickly become a

deterrent for subscribers. Do you have only minimum graphic skills? Not a problem. Basic users can navigate with many available templates.

Functional organization media sites are effective when principles that support the interest of the public and the organization are at the forefront of the organization's goals. The key is empowering individuals to build relationships by communicating the real story. Social media becomes a marketing tool that shows our Army values to the communities in which we live and work. Communications media do not always have a feedback mechanism for the audience to discuss pressing issues; social media in the Army can change this by opening the communication channels.

Risk and Challenges

Change is not without risks and challenges. The implementation of social media has not been an easy step for the Department of the Army. Security is the primary concern for leaders when users exercise their right to express their opinion in a public forum. Protected information in the wrong hands is a detriment to our Armed Forces. Indeed, the seemingly harmless blog can cost lives.

The challenge has been balancing operations security with public awareness. Operations security is the protection of classified, sensitive, or need-to-know information, and the Army trains our Soldiers in such procedures. Social media presents new challenges that require all users to refresh themselves on the rules of engagement.

Some common information that our adversaries are looking for includes information about present and future U.S. capabilities, news about U.S. diplomacy, names and photographs of important people, the degree and speed of mobilizations, and leave policies.¹³

Without proper training, personnel can inadvertently release sensitive information on social networking sites. It's also important for Soldiers to make sure their family members understand the importance of operations security and what they can and cannot post. Simply put, would you share your bank account and PIN number online? Government information is just as sensitive. If the information you shared made headlines, would you be happy about it? These two simple questions can help leaders educate their Soldiers on protecting our Nation's resources while communicating their story.

Another concern is efficiency and how social media may distract from mission accomplishment. Operations Order 09-01 lifted security blocks and brought social media into the office instead of the corner store. Many users fail to understand that privacy settings do not protect a post. Regardless of the user's intent, a level of responsibility is required when sharing information the world can now see, read, and copy at the click of a mouse.

Despite the risks and challenges, social media and open communication have the ability to make the Army stronger. The Army has taken an active role in establishing a positive social media presence. Trust enables leaders to open up their organizations to social media, and training provides confidence in the rules of engagement that govern social media use. A crisis plan is important. However, because even the best-laid plans can encounter problems, not formulating a program based on risk allows others to tell our story with preconceived notions and inaccurate data.

Being social still means chatting with family, friends, and neighbors. Technology has just expanded your favorite hangout or backyard meeting place to

include the world. Web-based applications that share, articulate, and manage information with an active presence place the Army's social media program on point. Soldiers have a story to tell, and the public wants to hear it—not only what is important, but what shapes officers' and Soldiers' lives as they defend this Nation and democracy. **MR**

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